

Remarks by Congressman David R. Obey
Earth Day Tour, April 2006

On April 22 we will celebrate the 37th anniversary of Earth Day.

It will be the first Earth Day we celebrate without its founder, Gaylord Nelson. His life

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s work places him in the pantheon of Wisconsin

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s environmental pioneers

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on equal footing with John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Sigurd Olson.

For 40 years Gaylord was my mentor and teacher. For me, he defined what politics is supposed to be about and how it is supposed to be practiced.

He was, in my lifetime, Wisconsin

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s greatest example of a public servant serving the greater good.

Many of Gaylord=s friends and followers have been asking about the direction that Earth Day should take now that Gaylord is gone.

Well, Gaylord took the lead on many aspects of environmental policy, but his thoughts on the issue were global. I think he would say that today the greatest challenge the planet faces is the problem of global warming because it involves nothing less than the eco system that sustains us all.

There are, of course, other challenges that require our attention as well, and I want to take a few moments to take note

of them.

During the years Gaylord served in Congress, a bipartisan coalition led by Gaylord, Scoop Jackson, Ed Muskie, and Bob Stafford in the Senate and Mo Udall, Phil Burton, Pete McCloskey, Henry Reuss, and Paul Rogers in the House won many victories on the environmental front:

- The Clean Water and Clean Air Act
- The Wilderness Act
- The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act
- The National Trails System Act
- Congressional Designation of the Ice Age Trail and North Country Scenic Trails
- The Toxic Substance and Control Act
- The Safe Drinking Water Act
- Superfund Legislation and many more.

But with the election of Ronald

Reagan things became more difficult:

Â· James Watt put a lid on efforts to protect public lands.

Â· President Carter=s energy efficiency programs, begun at the height of the first energy crisis, were cut by 70 percent.

The situation got worse when Tom DeLay organized "Project Relief" when he and his allies came to power in the 1990s. The Washington Post, in a two-page story, chronicled how DeLay made special interest, corporate lobbyists equal partners in a legislative effort to dismantle environmental regulations

that had protected the public interest for decades. They rammed through the House B

with yours truly at the center of the opposition B

17 actions which rolled back protections afforded by the Clean Air and Water Act and the Toxic Substance Control Act. When I read from that Washington Post article during House debate, DeLay

literally took a poke at me on the House Floor.

During Clinton=s presidency, Congressmen Norm Dicks and Ralph Regula and I negotiated a major expansion of the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

But within three years the House Republican Majority walked away from that agreement and slashed funds for the program.

Here in Wisconsin, Republican State Legislators, led by John Gard, attempted a similar effort to gut Wisconsin

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s Stewardship Fund, which

had first been conceived by Gaylord Nelson when he was Governor and had later been expanded by a Republican successor, Warren Knowles.

When George Bush, Jr. came to power, the Cheney energy transition

team was appointed to set the stage for new policies. That 63 person panel contained 50 representatives from the giant energy companies, but only 1 from energy conservation organizations and 1 from consumer organizations.

I suppose that is what

Fox News would call
A
fair and balanced.
@

Â· Today our nation
=
s parks are being
starved for funds and
are facing a

maintenance backlog of
over \$5 billion.

Â· The
Administration =

s deceptively named
Clear-Skies proposal
would allow old
technology coal fired
power plants to avoid
cleaning up their act.

The new standards
under that plan would
allow

twice as much
carbon
dioxide
and 50 percent more

sulphur
dioxide
to be emitted than
would be allowable
under existing law.

Just this month the EPA proposed a new rule weakening airborne toxic emission standards effecting toxins such as lead, arsenic, and mercury for

refineries, hazardous waste incinerators, chemical plants, and steel mills, effectively allowing tons of additional toxic burdens into the atmosphere.

Seven of EPA

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s regional offices
disagreed with the
proposal so
strongly that they
said it would allow
polluters to
A

virtually avoid
regulation and
greatly complicate
any enforcement.
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These are all

serious
environmental
challenges, but
they represent
only part of the
challenge that we
confront as we
think about the
potential

catastrophe of
global warming.

Aldo Leopold,
Gaylord Nelson,
Sigurd Olson all
understood that

the most
fundamental bond
between us as
biological
organisms is the
bond we share
because of the
common air we

breathe, the water
that we drink, the
land we walk. T
he most basic test
of our respect for
each other and
respect for
ourselves is the

way we fulfill our
stewardship
responsibilities to
the global
environment that
sustains us all.

In the last
conversation
Gaylord and I
had about the
environment
before he died,

he repeated his
often stated
observation that
mankind needed
to understand
that a 50 percent
increase in
global population

did not just mean
there would be a
50 percent
increase in the
number of
people. There
would be a 50
percent increase

in everything:
houses,
automobiles,
roads, traffic
jams, timber
cutting, mining,
and pollution.

And such
changes will put
the planet
=
s eco-system at
risk.

Gaylord
believed that the
three greatest
moral and
political
challenges
facing us were
the ease with

which our
country could
become mired
in war, the
growing chasm
between rich
and poor and
the challenge of

global warming
and that in the
long-term the
most
consequential of
the three was
global warming.

He was right,
but
unfortunately
the people who
run our
government
today do not
agree.

They still act
as though the
threat of global
warming is just
a theory and

not a scientific
reality. But
the evidence is
all around us
and is visible
to all but those
who have an

economic
interest in not
seeing it:

- Leading
scientists at

NASA have
reported in a
multi-year
study involving
global and
environmental
monitoring that

even if we hold
greenhouse
gases at their
present level
global
temperatures
will continue to

rise and could increase as much as 10 degrees in the next hundred years.

- Tempera

ture readings
in the U.S.
have increased
markedly in the
last 140 years.

- Core

drillings in
glaciers
around the
world enable
us to study
bubbles in the
ice that hold air

samples going
back hundreds
of thousands
of years.

They tell us
that the level of

carbon dioxide
in the
atmosphere is
higher now
than it has
been in more
than 300,000

years.

- Other
measurements
of temperature,
atmospheric
chemical

content, and
historic
readings of
atmospheric
phenomena
tell us that the
past few

decades are
radically
different from
any previous
measurable
era.

- Since

1970 the
duration and
intensity of
hurricanes has
increased by
50 percent.

- Records
show that
oceans are
getting
warmer,
consistent with
the warnings

scientists have
provided
throughout the
past two
decades.

- The

number of
tornados in the
U.S. is now the
highest in
recorded
history B
1,700 in one

year.

- Two
hundred
western cities
have broken
heat records

in the past two
years.

Glaciers are
like the

proverbial
canaries in the
mines B they
are the early
warning
system of
global climate

change and
they are telling
us something:

- Alaskan
glaciers have
receded
dramatically
in the past

100 years as
surface
temperature
has risen.

- Twenty-s
even of
thirty-eight
glaciers in
Glacier Park

are gone, and
all of them
are likely to
be gone long
before this
century

reaches its
halfway point.

- Ninety
percent of the
earth's
fresh water is
held captive

in the
Antarctic ice
cap and it is
showing signs
of instability.

The Larson
ice shelf, 700
feet thick,
was expected
to last 100
years.

It suddenly
collapsed in
two weeks.

- If west
Antarctica
were to break
up the world
=

s oceans
levels could
rise 20 feet
or more
B
not 2 feet,

but 20 feet

B

goodbye

Bangladesh

B

New Orleans

will become
the norm for
every coastal
city in the
world.

In the
Northern
hemisphere
heat is

transferred
from the
Equator to
the Polar
regions by
ocean

currents,
including the
Gulf Stream.

Those
currents are

driven by
differences
in
temperature
and salinity
of the world

=

s oceans:

- The
Arctic ice
cap has lost
half of its
thickness in

the last half
century.

- Greenla
nd's ice
cap is

melting at a
highly
accelerated
rate. If it
goes,
one-third of

Florida will
be
underwater.

If it goes, it
could shut

down the
major
Atlantic
ocean
currents.

The current
that drives
the Gulf
Stream has
already
decreased

30 percent
in 50 years.

- Algae
blooms
have now

been seen
in the Baltic.

- Water
temperatures
that are

way outside
normal
fluctuations
are raising
the strength

of
hurricanes.

Do we
really want

Katrina to
be the
norm?

- Even if
we could

stop the
increase in
pollution
now, it will
take

hundreds of
years to
return the
earth to
normal

atmospheric
ranges.

How many
more

warnings do
we need?

This is not

just an
environmental
problem;
it is a moral
problem:

- My
generation
will be gone
in 20 years.

We will not
see the
worse
consequen
ces like you

will begin
to, and your
children

=

s

generation
will be hit
the hardest
unless we
break the

hold that
inertia has
on America
=
s policy

makers and
begin to
make hard
choices
now.

- We
must have
a
Manhattan

Project-like
effort to
develop
alternative
energy

sources.

- We
must get
serious

about
alternate
energy
sources
and energy

conservation.

- We

must

double

mileage
standards
for
automobile
s and find

ways to
either
radically
modify or
else

abolish the
use of the
internal
combustion
engine in

the
automobile
.
Gayl
ord called
for that 30

years ago.

- We

must

stabilize

the earth
=
s
population
numbers.

Those
actions are
no longer

optional;
they are
fundament
al and
must be

taken now.

The
collapse of
the
Antarctic
shelf, the

collapse of
the
Greenland
ice cap,
the

elimination
of the
Polar ice
cap in
summer

would be a
big deal.

Together
the

possibility
represents
the most
serious
national

security
issue we
face.

It will

radically
disrupt the
world

=

s climate,

its
geography
, its
civilization,
so we

have
plenty of
work to
do.

First we
must
recognize
that this is
the most

important
long-range
problem
facing
mankind.

Second,
we must
educate
the public

on the
issue.

Third, we
must act

as though
our future
depends
on it
because it

does.

It is time

to
recognize
that the
politicians
who are

still in a
state of
wishful
denial are
a danger

to our
children =
s future.

When a

United States Senator from Oklahoma

says that
"global
warming
is the
greatest

hoax ever
perpetrate
d on the
American
people, â€

□ he must
be
recognize
d for the
national

security
risk that
he really
is.

And when
the
President
of the
United

States
pursues
policies
that
prevent us

from
facing
mankind
=
s largest

problem,
he is also
a huge
security
risk to

America's and the Earth itself.

We can
no longer
accept
wishful
denial.

Nobel Laureate Thomas Schilling

has said
that
the
uncertain
y

surroundi
ng global
warming
is not
mainly

about
whether it
is going to
be real,
but is

rather
about the
magnitude
and speed
of

warming.â

€□

The late
John

Sawhill,
who
served us
in many
capacities

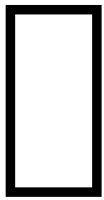
, including
a
chairmans
hip of
Nature

Conserva
ncy once
said,
A
In the

end, our
society
will be
defined,
not only

by what
we create,
but by
what we
refuse to

destroy.â€



In our
lifetime
we will be
defined
by what

we do to
preserve
the earth
itself and
as James

Hanson of
NASA
has
warned
us, we do

not have
much
time B
perhaps
fewer

than 10
years to
take the
action
needed to

avoid a
catastroph
hic tipping
point.

As
Franklin

Roosevelt
said
when he
took the

oath of
office in
1933 at
the

depths of
the worst
economic
crisis in

the
history of
the
country,

â€œWe
need
action
and we

need it
now. â€œ

